

A New and Unsettling Force:
Selected Writings and Speeches by
Cheri Honkala

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Preface

Cheri Honkala has dedicated her life to abolishing poverty, and has over 20 years of experience organizing the poor and developing the organizing model of "the poor organizing the poor." She is one of the founding members and former Executive Director of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU)- based in Philadelphia- and current National Coordinator of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC), a national network of over 100 grassroots, anti-poverty organizations. Cheri is also Co-Chair of the National Welfare Rights Union and a member of the Interim National Council of the Labor Party. She has traveled across the United States and throughout the world, documenting economic human rights violations and speaking to the poverty that is growing daily in the United States. Cheri has been arrested dozens of times for participating in non-violent civil disobedience to prevent the poor from being "disappeared" in the richest country in the world. She has won numerous awards and much recognition, including being named one of *Philadelphia Magazine's* 100 most powerful Philadelphians, *Philadelphia Weekly's* 1997 Woman of the Year award, and the National Association of Social Workers, Pennsylvania Chapter's 2000 Public Citizen of the Year award. Cheri has been featured in *Ms. Magazine*, *George Magazine*, and on ABC News' *20/20*. She was recently named one of twelve United States human rights defenders in danger in the United States in a 2004 Front Line report entitled *Front Line USA: Threats, Attacks, Arrests and Harassment of Human Rights Defenders in the United States*.

Cheri Honkala's message is one that people need to hear. Her message is unsettling, and aims to awaken new leaders who will help build a movement to end poverty in the United States. Cheri demands economic human rights for all- including the right to housing, healthcare, education, food, and a job at a living wage- and she makes it clear that there is no excuse for poverty in the United States, the richest country in the world. Cheri understands that in order to build a movement to end poverty in the United States, we need a core of

committed leaders, and she speaks to the fundamental importance of developing these leaders from all segments of society, but particularly and strategically from the ranks of the poor.

Cheri reminds us of the tremendous need for unity of the poor across color lines, invoking the words of Dr. Martin Luther King: "There are millions of poor people in this country who have little, if nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life" (*The Trumpet of Conscience*, 1967). Her writings demonstrate *her commitment, her clarity, and her competence*.

Cheri Honkala is a poor white mother of two sons. She was raised in a poor family in Minneapolis, the oldest of five children. She first became homeless as a teenage while she was pregnant with her first son. Cheri was homeless several more times while her older son was growing up; they survived on her low-paying jobs or welfare while Cheri was also working to organize the poor in Minneapolis. After moving to Philadelphia, Cheri started the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in 1991 with a group of poor mothers on welfare, holding meetings in the basement of a church in the multiracial Kensington neighborhood, which is the poorest community in Pennsylvania.

Over the past decade, Cheri and the KWRU have secured housing for more than 500 Philadelphia families by taking over abandoned housing, pressuring city agencies to address poor peoples' housing needs, and building homeless encampments, or "Tent Cities." Her dedication helped lead the KWRU to a historic position as an affiliate of the National Union of Healthcare and Hospital Employees, AFSCME, AFL-CIO; the first labor union to award formal recognition to a union made up primarily of unemployed and underemployed poor people. Most significantly, Cheri has helped to develop numerous leaders from amongst the ranks of the poor and has worked to break down of the stereotypes and misconceptions about poor people and poverty that block the development of a powerful movement to end poverty. These

emerging leaders are at the forefront of a growing movement to end poverty. More information about the KWRU's history and current activities can be found at www.kwru.org.

Following a national bus tour in 1998, Cheri was one of the driving forces behind the founding of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, a broad, multi-racial network of over 100 poor people's groups from urban and rural communities across the United States. Cheri is the National Coordinator of the Campaign. As National Coordinator, Cheri is charged with ensuring the ongoing development of emerging leaders from communities throughout the United States, as well as the development of the organizations making up the Campaign. Recently, Cheri and the other leaders of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign held a March for Economic Human Rights in 2003 from Marks, Mississippi to Washington D.C. on the 35th Anniversary of the Poor People's March of 1968 that Martin Luther King was planning when he was killed. In 2004, the PPEHRC organized a successful, un-permitted month-long Tent City and March for Our Lives on opening day of the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City. For more information about the history, activities, and members of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, please visit www.economichumanrights.org. More information about the University of the Poor, which is the educational arm of the PPEHRC established in 2000 can be found at www.universityofthepoor.org.

Cheri continues to live in Kensington with her younger son, still struggling daily to make ends meet. However, she has dedicated her life to uniting and organizing the poor as a social and political force at the forefront of a growing movement to end poverty and to guarantee economic human rights for all.

This collection includes thirteen speeches and writings written between 1995 and 2004, and are presented in chronological order. Some were written for speaking engagements at rallies, universities, or national and international confer-

ences; others were written for publication. All speak to the key values that Cheri Honkala works for every day: the need to develop leaders— particularly from amongst the ranks of the poor— to build a movement to end poverty and the fundamental importance of the unity of the poor across color lines.

The first selection is a narrative piece that Cheri wrote in 1995 during the KWRU's Tent City at 4th and Lehigh Streets in North Philadelphia. Originally published in 1999 in Katherine Howard's anthology *Women of Courage*, this piece illustrates the courage, strength, and genius in the emerging leaders of the KWRU. Next, we have included the transcript of the testimony that Cheri delivered to the Ways and Means Committee of the United States House of Representatives on February 2, 1995 on welfare reform. In this piece, she describes the circumstances that lead many poor mothers, including herself, to depend on welfare. Third is the transcript of the speech that Cheri gave at a 1995 memorial for Bob Kasen, a labor leader and a founding member of the Labor Party, in which she describes both the significant contributions that Bob Kasen made as a leader and the importance of "building bridges" between the movement to end poverty and organized labor.

The fourth selection, entitled "Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign: Born in the United States of America," was written in 1998 and describes the steps that led to the formation of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and later, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, as well as how and why these organizations began thinking, educating, and organizing from a human rights perspective. In the fifth selection, a transcript of the speech Cheri gave to the United Nations in November 1998, she encouraged members of the U.N. to "see this growing poverty as a direct violation of Articles 23, 25 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Section 1, Paragraph 30 of the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action (VDPA) regarding 'poverty, hunger and other denials of economic, social and cultural rights'."

Next, we have included a transcript of the speech delivered at the Hague Appeal for Peace in 1999 in the Hague, the Netherlands linking poverty and war. Cheri explains her conviction that we must end poverty if we are ever to end war because war is rooted in dynamics of wealth and power. The seventh piece is an editorial piece entitled "Deadbeat Dad' or Unemployed Father," written in 1999. In this piece, Cheri explains how the stereotype of the "Deadbeat Dad," like the stereotype of the "Welfare Queen," are used to blame poor people for being poor, and prevent poor men and women from organizing and fighting for power.

In the eighth included speech, given in 2001 at Cornell University, Cheri describes in detail the events during the 1996 March for Our Lives from Philadelphia to the Capital Rotunda in Harrisburg, PA and the subsequent Tent City at the Capital Rotunda. These events led to the KWRU learning about the Universal Declaration on Human Rights— particularly Articles 23, 25, and 25 which address economic human rights— and developing an organizing and leadership model based on a human rights perspective. The ninth selection is the transcript of an address Cheri gave to the National Conference of the American Civil Liberties Union in 2002. In it, she issues a challenge to the assembled lawyers to more aggressively fight for economic rights and the rights of the poor.

The tenth selection is an essay entitled "A New and Unsettling Force." It was co-written in 2003 with Willie Baptist, Education Director of the KWRU and Co-Coordinator of the University of the Poor, the educational arm of the PPEHRC. An abridged version of this essay was published in *The Other Side*. In this essay, Cheri and Willie discuss the relevance of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, which was the major project of Dr. Martin Luther King's final years- to the movement to end poverty today, and the need for a nonviolent, multiracial army of the poor to be a "be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life." The next speech was delivered at the First Hemispheric Gathering Against Militarization in San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico in May 2003. In this piece, Cheri describes to the audience

the realities of poverty in the United States that are hidden from view and obscured by the vast majority of the media, and links the movement to end poverty in the United States with freedom struggles all over the world.

The twelfth selection is the transcript of a speech Cheri gave at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, during the Poor People's March for Economic Human Rights. This March followed the trail of the 1968 Poor People's March that King was planning when he was killed. Finally, we have included the transcript of the speech that Cheri delivered at the meeting of the World Court of Women, at the 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai, India. In this speech, Cheri explains how the U.S. government deliberately hides from the world the experiences of the poor in the United States and asks for world intervention in addressing poverty and other human rights violations occurring daily in the United States.

By adopting the mantle of the late Martin Luther King and by leading the way for others to do the same, Cheri Honkala personifies "a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life." Cheri and the members and leaders of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign understand that, in order for this movement to grow and succeed, many more "Cheri Honkalas" are needed. Cheri's message has already inspired thousands to become leaders in this fight to build a movement to abolish poverty, and it is our hope and wish that the speeches and writings presented here will inspire many more to do the same.

Carrie Young

Narrative from 4th and Lehigh Tent City, 1995

The sun is hot. I'm sweating already at 6:10 AM as I lay on my lawn chair that has now worn itself through so that I feel the metal supports on my tail bone. Another day on 4th & Lehigh in the heart of Philadelphia's Barrio. Another heat warning has been issued today. With the humidity, they expect it to be 110. The same sun has now forced the homeless mothers and children from their tents, they move slowly. Everything moves slowly as the heat pushes on.

The headlines read that 47 have now died from Philadelphia's heat wave and we burn inside as we read on because we know they didn't die from heat. We know they died because they couldn't afford a fan. We know that they died from poverty. And we know that the homeless women and children soon will die on this lot if we don't find them housing. If not from the heat of summer, then from the cold of winter.

Yet as we look at each other today it is hard to move on. The sun is hotter now, my clothes are soaked in sweat, I have lost my appetite. A child runs by me crying with a runny nose and I don't even want to move. Perhaps I will just lay here and dry up like a raisin in the sun. This is it. They win, I say to myself. I give up. I can't do this anymore. I want to swim in the ocean. Feel the cool of the water as it refreshes my sunburned head. I want to stop seeing, feeling, moving. The pain is too great, my heart is on fire.

I try to run. There is no shade on this lot. Just 37 homeless families and rocks. Rocks and rocks and dry land. I close my eyes to escape it all. I begin to drift into sleep but am abruptly awakened by two local gangster boys holding bags of ice that are dripping on me. As if awakening from a coma, I open my eyes without moving and stare at them without moving. The young male covered in tattoos says, "Here, this is for you guys. I know it ain't much, but it's the best we can do right now." Before I'm able to move my lips, they're gone and a young woman is standing before me with a food stamp.

"Here," she says, "buy something for the kids."

As my heart burns on, Flaco and Olga joke with me and tell me that it's time to go house shopping. As I manage to lift my body into the back of the pick-up truck, Elba asks me if things are going to be alright. "Are the police going to take my children from me because I don't have a house, like they took Noemi's children from her?"

"Elba," I say, "you know we won't let anyone take your children away from you and if neither the city nor the federal government gives you a house, we will take over one for you and your children." She smiles as my words set fire to her fears.

As we arrive at the two-story house, I grab the scrapers and paintbrushes and make my way up the stairs. Mariluz tries to joke with me as we scrape the walls, but she sees I am much too serious today. As I scrape the walls the paint chips cover me and the wall itself begins to come apart. The beads of sweat have now made it possible for the paint chips to stick on my face, my eyes are covered, now I am crying. The tears are tamping out the fire. The room is filled with bodies covered in paint and sweat and yet their arms, my arms are still moving. I don't know where this courage to move on comes from, but it just keeps coming. Now they sing songs in Spanish as Mariluz paints my leg with a paint brush. I chase her through the house with a paint brush, out the door, where there is a breeze. My tears are flowing now. I feel alive. I know why I'm alive and why I love them all, all the families who have been told to just dry up in the sun, who daily have the courage to go on, to move, to move against great odds, who daily choose to really live.

Testimony to U.S. House Ways and Means Committee,
February 2, 1995

Introduction

My name is Cheri Honkala. I am a welfare recipient. I'm part of a volunteer community group in my neighborhood in Philadelphia that works with AFDC moms.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today and thank you for scheduling additional hearings on welfare reform so that members of the public have an opportunity to present their ideas and opinions. I am honored to be asked to speak about the problems my son and I face.

As a poor mother, I agree with members of Congress that the welfare system must change in fundamental ways. However, I am disturbed about the assumptions many people make about welfare recipients, and the demeaning ways people talk about us.

My Story

I love my son and I do my best to take care of him. I'm really proud of him. He's 14 years old, and he's a good student. He goes to a magnet high school that he had to pass a competitive exam to get into. He's not on drugs; he's not violent; he's a really good kid. Things haven't been easy for us. Sometimes we've been homeless, and sometimes we've been hungry. I want my son to understand that just because we're poor doesn't mean that we aren't good people. My son is hurt every time someone talks about women who get welfare as being terrible people and bad mothers.

When I was a teenager I had to leave my home because of domestic violence in my family. When I was 17, I got a job at Red Barn, a fast food restaurant in Minneapolis. I moved into an efficiency apartment with a girlfriend. While I was working, I became pregnant. At this point, going on welfare was the furthest thing from my mind. However, while I was

pregnant I was laid off from my job and had a lot of trouble finding work. Because welfare in Minnesota wasn't available to women until late in their pregnancies, welfare wasn't an option for me.

Since I had no income, I couldn't pay my rent and was evicted. I had nowhere to go, and I had to sleep in my car every night. When a drunk driver hit my car and totaled it, I had to live in a series of shelters. Finally, in my last trimester, I became eligible for AFDC benefits. Welfare helped me and my newborn son, Mark, get back on our feet.

Welfare made it possible for me to go back to school and get a high school degree. I found work again and held a series of different jobs in Minneapolis. Over the years, I worked in a cafeteria, as a nursing assistant, as a cashier, as a waitress, and doing child care. Eventually I got married and moved to Philadelphia, where my new husband had a job. I also got a job in Philadelphia.

After about a year on the job in Philadelphia I was laid off and couldn't find another job. The stress of trying to live on one income put a severe strain on my marriage and my husband and I broke up. When I got divorced, me and my son had nowhere to go and nothing to fall back on. Most of my family and friends were back in Minnesota and I was unemployed. Although I pounded the pavement looking for work, I was finally forced to apply for welfare again.

Like most welfare recipients I know, I would much rather work than live on welfare. Whenever I can find work, I take it. But the jobs I can find don't last, and don't provide health benefits for me and my son. I hope that I will find another job soon, but I worry about what will happen if I get laid off again.

I'm 31 years old now, and my son is in 9th grade. I'm not a teen parent anymore, but under the Personal Responsibility Act provision cutting off AFDC for children born to teen parents, my son wouldn't be eligible for help now, 14 years later. It wouldn't matter that I've been employed; it would-

n't matter that I've been married; it wouldn't matter that my son is well-behaved and a good student. The only help we would be offered is foster care or a group home. I love my son. It would hurt both of us terribly to be separated. He doesn't need to be raised by strangers, and I don't need a group home. What we do need is money to live on and help finding a stable job at a living wage with health benefits.

The Value of the Safety Net

I think that my experiences, and the experiences of women I know, show how important welfare is to our survival.

First of all, welfare is an important safety net for poor families. I've needed welfare at several different times in my life-- in order to finish high school, then later when my marriage broke up, and when I've been laid off from jobs. If welfare had not been available when we needed it, my son and I would have been sleeping on the streets. Welfare helped me hold my family together, and take care of my son.

Second, I know from my own experiences, and from talking with other welfare recipients, that young women do not have babies in order to get a welfare check. Because of the hardship I went through, I tell young women I know to wait until they are really ready. But I know that cutting off welfare for teen parents will end up hurting the children; it won't stop teenagers from getting pregnant.

Third, many of the women I know who get welfare have been beaten up by abusive boyfriends or husbands. A lot of times battered women lose their jobs, because of the abuser making trouble. Welfare is often the only thing that makes it possible for a woman who is being abused to get away and to protect her children from the violence. I get upset when people say that women who get welfare should have gotten married instead, or should have stayed married, because I think they must not understand that for women who are being battered, staying married means broken bones and black eyes and danger for their children.

I also think that people don't understand that when you're being beaten, you don't have choices about when to have sex or whether you get pregnant. I know women who have been forced to have sex, who have been beaten because they said no, or because they tried to use birth control. I know young women who've gotten pregnant as result of rape or incest.

Fourth, most people who get welfare have worked in the past and want to work now. Welfare benefits are extremely low. My son and I barely survive on \$316 a month in AFDC-- the maximum grant in Pennsylvania-- and another \$212 in food stamps. It is almost impossible to live on that amount of money. There just aren't enough jobs for everyone who wants to work.

In my community, for instance, the Scott Tissue Company, the William Penn Company, and the Philadelphia Naval Yard all recently closed. The electric company just laid off another 2000 people. The unemployment rate in Philadelphia is 8%. Arbitrary time limits on welfare don't recognize how hard it can be to find and keep a job in today's economy.

The low-paying jobs I've gotten don't have health care benefits or sick days and don't pay enough to cover the costs of decent child care and transportation to work. These things are necessary for women with children to keep our jobs.

Without sick days and reliable health care, child care, and transportation, poor women end up missing work and risk losing their jobs. If your kids get sick, you have to miss work. If your child care provider gets sick, you have to miss work. I know many women who were fired because they missed work because of an ill child or a sick elderly parent. Meaningful welfare reform has to recognize that without child care, health care, and transportation, low income mothers can't keep their jobs.

Another thing I know from my own experiences is that welfare benefits are not enough for a family to live on and look for work at the same time. Just living on welfare means con-

stantly scrambling. I have had to sell my last belongings at a pawn shop; my son and I get our clothes at a thrift store; we've had to wait in lines at the soup kitchen, and go without heat when I can't pay the bills. Our phone is shut-off more often than on.

Looking for work costs money. To look for work you need money to either pay your phone bill or quarters to call from a pay phone. If you can't afford a phone, which I often can't, prospective employers can't call you back. You need money to buy a newspaper to read the want ads or money to get to the library to read the paper there. You need money to buy shampoo and detergent to look acceptable at a job interview. AFDC grant amounts should be increased and the AFDC rules should be changed to allow families to find jobs and keep a little of their welfare money as they make the transition to work.

Poor mothers like me struggle to do what's right for our families and we are good parents. The assumption that poor families don't take good care of their children is wrong. When I was a teenage parent I did everything I could to make sure Mark had what he needed.

You may look at me and think that because I'm on welfare there must be something wrong with me, and that somehow it's my fault that I'm poor. I am here to tell you that there is nothing wrong with me. I'm a hard working person and a good mother. Everyone needs help sometimes.

Tribute to Bob Kasen, February 17, 1995

This is an important hour for us as we say good bye to the man we worked with, fought next to, learned from and loved. When KWRU first met Bob we thought "Oh no, here goes another well-meaning labor guy who's going to tell us how much we don't know and who would insist on us riding in the passengers' seat as he directed which way we should go. But this never happened.

Bob insisted that we take the drivers' seat and do what he called "what we know how to do best." He treated our homeless, unemployed and welfare recipient members as political equals with real contributions to make. Bob saw poverty for what it was: the most disgusting form of existence and it enraged him. He hated the human indignities that came with it.

When he came to Kensington to see the homeless children living on the lot you could see the tears in his eyes, and the pain in his heart. Bob felt deeply about what was happening to men, women and children in this country and so he never rested. He lived out his convictions and his commitment was seen in his actions.

Each time we saw Bob for lunch or dinner it was never just about lunch or dinner - it was constantly about building a bridge - a bridge many people never knew he was building, for most of his work never took place under the spotlight. Yet everyday he set out to build this bridge, while he was busy doing 50 other things. Every time we talked to Bob it was accompanied with a pen and paper so we could jot down a new list of people to connect with, new people to make alliances with and break our isolation.

I'd find myself looking for Bob after he made an initial introduction of me to someone else - only to see him across the room with that smile putting two other people into a relationship with each other.

Bob was a bridge builder; most of the time a bridge builder

over very troubled waters. No matter how difficult the task he took the challenge, putting us in rooms with so many different people, because he never saw us as any different than any other of his working class brothers and sisters.

Bob embraced the poor. He treated us with so much humanity, at times it left me speechless. When I would go to thank him he would stop me in mid-sentence saying so much with the unspoken word. Bob truly loved his working class brothers and sisters in the deepest sense and we will never forget him.

His love for his family and Cecilia was even deeper. I had never met a man who would, after all his years of marriage, still introduce Cecilia as his bride.

A challenge is left for all of us here today - can we love each other as much as Bob loved us - so that we can become instruments of change to end the misery of our brothers and sisters? As we take over abandoned houses we will think of Bob, as we build the Labor Party we will think of Bob. As we stand on the picket lines with organized labor we will think of Bob. In Kensington, the poorest district of Pennsylvania, we will paint a mural on the wall of a bridge, paying tribute to a man who walked with and fought with his poorest brothers and sisters, helping to build that bridge.

Yes, we will become the instruments of change Bob - so rest in peace my friend for that bridge you spent your life helping building. Together, we will cross it.

To celebrate Bob's life is to live out his vision...

Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign: Born in the United States of America, 1998

The Kensington Welfare Rights Union was born in Philadelphia in the poorest district in the state of Pennsylvania out of necessity in 1991 as cut backs were proposed in welfare. A group of poor mothers began holding meetings in a church basement about our common efforts to try and feed ourselves and our children. Immediately we encountered problems because the church could no longer afford heat during our meetings and the church was under tremendous stress because its food cupboard had dried up and they were no longer able to meet the needs of feeding the community. Weekly it was something new, no water in the swimming pools for children to play in, movie theatres in our community were a thing of the past and dollar stores and check cashing centers instead of banks began to open in the neighborhood. Welfare and drugs were now the largest sources of income in our community.

We knew that we had to do something, after all we really didn't have a choice. It was either develop leaders amongst the ranks of the poor or continue to watch the deterioration of our community and attend the funerals of those we love. So we set out to try and meet the need of those who were hungry and those who needed help in the welfare offices. We would distribute surplus food outside of the welfare office while we would make trips in and out in order to assist other welfare recipients whose benefits were being denied.

Our offices changed regularly due to little or no resources. From rat infested store fronts to vacant lots to my living room, we understood the importance of poor and homeless people themselves being able to come together in a safe space to map out a plan on how to address our own basic needs while trying to figure out how to create long term change. We tried to turn obstacles into challenges, but this was easier said than done, especially when we discovered that the lack of organization amongst the poor and homeless in Kensington wasn't just due to being unorganized. Every-

where we turned, institutions and politicians were consciously and unconsciously participated in organized disorganization. Whenever a notion of having a right to something began to creep into a section of the neighborhood, a new charity or a new entrepreneurial project would begin once again managing poverty and getting that section of the neighborhood away from claiming their rights to instead adjusting to a lower standard of living, now with perhaps a new shelter but not a right to housing.

Daily we fought to build organization regardless of the barriers that were put in front of us. Winning concessions at times but more importantly leaders from amongst the ranks of the poor. Although we were developing leaders, our conditions began to worsen and the concessions began to dry up. We could no longer afford to be isolated in Kensington. We began building what we called tent cities, using scraps of wood and utilizing the massive amounts of surplus couches and household items the wealthy throw away on a daily basis to supply our encampments. We increased our presence not only in Kensington but began to be a regular site in downtown Philadelphia. We were becoming a household word in the area, with trips to our nation's Liberty Bell, the moving of homeless families into the Convention Center, and the reclaiming of an abandoned church that had been closed down for years for families to live in. We were breaking our isolation! Students from college campuses would come and visit us and soon we had several volunteers from all over Philadelphia.

Just when the sun began to shine a little the rain came back again. In 1995, Act 35 became law in Pennsylvania and over a quarter of a million people had their medical assistance taken from them. Enraged and needing to address our governor, we marched from our tent city in Kensington to Harrisburg to discuss the impact on ourselves and our neighborhood. We walked over 140 miles, some days up to 22 miles a day. Most days we couldn't feel our feet and the pain in our legs shot through us as we laid down on blankets alongside the road each night to rest our tired bodies. People now

began to link up with us from all over Pennsylvania. They would drive out and leave food alongside the road for us, doctors would mend our feet in small towns and people of all colors would embrace us with tears and stories of how these medical cuts were going to hurt or kill someone they loved. Kensington Welfare Rights Union no longer carried the banner of the poor just from the barrio but KWRU was carrying the banner for the poor living in rural Pennsylvania as well. Together the inner city and rural poor began to link together in our efforts to get up and out of poverty. This was a crucial development for there was a new storm developing on the horizon.

A storm we never believed we would see in our wealthy country came with great speed and the amount of damage has yet to be documented. After 60 years of having a social safety net in the United States of America, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 ended welfare as we knew it in our country. Lobby efforts on a state and national level were no longer enough. We needed to link with the poor throughout the United States and we needed outside help from our poor brothers and sisters throughout the world. We didn't know how we were going to reach others throughout the United States let alone throughout the world. We saw that welfare reform was a law that was passed that would eventually deny people the right to eat and have a roof over their heads and worst of all—people would eventually die. We know that welfare reform was a violation of our economic human rights and that since these were human rights violations we were talking about we needed to go to the United Nations. So the first ever March for Economic Human Rights in the United States was spearheaded by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. In the March for Our Lives, welfare and other poor and homeless people throughout the U.S. marched from the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia to the United Nations in New York City.

People began to contact us from all over the world. They were curious about what was happening in the U.S. Many people didn't know that there was poverty in the U.S. and

many more people couldn't understand why we had so many homeless people. We began to see how our local movement was beginning to play a role in transforming the international human rights movement. For so long we were seen as a country that could play a role in the human rights movement by playing a solidarity role for the landless or peasants in some other part of the world, but now we needed help. We need human rights advocacy; we needed human rights education; we needed human rights monitors; and we needed international human rights law.

Utilizing the People's Decade for Human Rights Education we began to learn more about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and set out to teach everyone about it. We opened a KWRU Human Rights Center in Kensington and began to open up human rights houses in which we house homeless families who in turn advocate for everyone to have a right to housing and other human rights. We trained people to begin to see themselves as human rights monitors and began a massive documentation project. We launched a New Freedom Bus in June of 1998 calling for Freedom from Unemployment, Hunger and Homelessness. Welfare recipients, homeless people, and others who see themselves as impacted by welfare reform traveled together on a bus for an entire month documenting the stories of families throughout the country and how they've been impacted by welfare reform. Immediately, over 8000 people began logging onto our web page at <http://www.kwru.org>. Almost every continent in the world was learning about our growing movement for economic human rights in the United States.

We began to hold tours throughout our community for people from Europe and South America and all over—showing them first hand the devastating impact of welfare reform. We began to receive invitations to speak with people from Finland, Chile, Brazil, and others. From our neighborhood in Kensington, North Philadelphia we were now learning from and teaching each other about economic human rights. Throughout this process we have been working with a team of lawyers, examining international human rights law. Peter

Weiss from the Center for Constitutional Rights has been spearheading that process.

This year is sure to be a difficult year as more are cut off the roles without a right to a job at a living wage. As millions more will line our streets, we will continue to highlight Articles 23, 25, and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For in order to reclaim your rights, you first have to believe that you have a right to them.

In October of this year, poor and homeless families will link hands once again as they march side by side. This time from the seat of power in Washington D.C. to the United Nations in New York. This time marching for an entire month in what is called the March of the Americas. We are linking up the entire Western Hemisphere, with Canada and Latin America, calling for an end to poverty. The Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign has been born in the United States and the movement is building daily.

It has been a struggle to implement these human rights principles in the United States because the poor have been invisible and kept unorganized. The next generation of children depends upon us getting organized and we are determined to do just that.

Speech at the United Nations, November 3, 1998

I bring you greetings from poor and homeless families from around the United States of America, the ranks from which I come. We appreciate the opportunity to be allowed to address all of you today.

My name is Cheri Honkala and I am the director of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the National Spokesperson for the Economic Human Rights Campaign. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union is a multi-racial organization of poor and homeless families based in Philadelphia that has been developing leaders from among the ranks of the poor and fighting to secure basic human needs for poor men, women and children in the United States.

In August of 1996, welfare reform was signed into law in the United States. The dismantling of the social welfare system is happening all over the world as a result of economic and legislative policies and the globalization of our world's economy. The dismantling of this social welfare system and the effects of other economic policies and changes throughout the globe are causing severe violations of economic human rights to occur to the world's citizens. We are watching a growing polarization of the rich and the poor on a global level, making it difficult for much of the world's population to secure housing, employment, food, healthcare, or any kind of education. Recent figures from the United Nations showed that more than half of humanity exists on less than \$2.00 a day; that 1.3 billion people are so poor that they live in shanty towns and garbage dumps; and that 40,000 die every day from preventable diseases and malnutrition.

These garbage dumps, shanty towns and preventable diseases exist in my country too. As a matter of fact, after the dismantling of the welfare system began, we began to see things we never dreamed of seeing in our country. And this is why in June of this year we, poor and homeless people, began our Economic Human Rights Campaign. We toured the country in a new freedom bus going to over 34 cities and towns call-

ing for Freedom from Unemployment, Hunger and Homelessness. We turned ourselves into human rights monitors and began to document our hidden stories of economic human rights violations. We began to understand that "welfare reform," the new law passed in our country, was in itself a violation of our human rights. As we traveled this country we demanded a right to a job at a living wage. All people wanted was an ability to provide for their families.

That ability is decreasing daily. Those of us who have slept on the sidewalks can see the numbers growing. The fastest growing segment of the homeless in the United States is families with children. Families who must go daily and wait in line from early morning until 6pm at night, praying and hoping that the shelter provider calls out their name; that they and their children have been chosen for the few remaining beds for the night. Gloria, a homeless mother of three young girls in Philadelphia wasn't chosen and I watched her as she drowned in tears of desperation, trying to make a bed out of the sidewalk. Feeling the cold, hard pavement pierce her spine, she lay beneath the bright lights of the Marriott Hotel in center city and watched the rats as they traveled back and forth along the curb.

My friends, we see this growing poverty as a direct violation of Articles 23, 25 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Section 1, Paragraph 30 of the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action (VDPA) regarding "poverty, hunger and other denials of economic, social and cultural rights."

In 1993, the Vienna World Conference expressed its, and I quote, "dismay and condemnation that gross and systematic violations and situations that constitute serious obstacles to the full enjoyment of all human rights to continue to occur in different parts of the world. Such violations include... poverty, hunger and other denials of economic and social and cultural human rights." Today, these gross and systematic violations persist. In light of this fact and as follow up to the Vienna Plus Five, we recommend that the UN set up a spe-

cial system to monitor the performance of governments in living up to their obligation of economic human rights.

May Gloria's tears of humanity turn into a river of justice, keeping our eyes on the rats, while ensuring a movement is built to put an end to the inhumane existence of living in poverty.

Speech at the Hague Appeal for Peace, 1999

"Root causes of War/Culture of Peace: Creating a New Vision for the 21st Century"

While sitting in my one room apartment thinking about what I would say today, I yelled at 8 year old Frankie to get down as gun fire went off outside my window as I managed to make it into my kitchen over the homeless family sprawled out across the one tiny room that I live in. As I opened up my \$5,000 hospital bill which I have no way to pay, I managed to convince my landlord over the phone not to evict me after not paying the rent for the last two months.

As the red flashing lights of the police car passes by my window, my mind drifted to thoughts of who was being picked up tonight - was it my neighbor's son and who will be next and what is to come of my future and my country's future?

You see, where I live welfare is the number one source of income and drugs are the second and this year begins the elimination of welfare for millions of people. After 60 years in my country, people are no longer will be able to feed, clothe, and house themselves.

So as I turn on my television, and see the eyes of the refugees of Kosovo, I look down on the floor to the eyes of the homeless children sleeping at the edge of my bed next to me. In bed is the homeless mother who is trying to recover from her triple bypass and as I lay down I hope to get up again the next morning, 'cause the undeclared war occurring in the United States of America is something very real and deadly. I live in the belly of the beast where there is the highest rate of violent crimes in the world. An average of 2 million violent crimes occur annually, 6 million victims of whom 24,000 are murdered.

In 1997, 39,720 people were killed with firearms and 110,000 others injured by firearms. In seven states, being shot is the major cause of death and injury. We also have

more prisons than at the height of apartheid in South Africa. More prisons than any other place in the world.

The United States is the richest country of the world, the gap between the rich and the poor is one of the widest in the western world. The richest 1% of families today possess 40% of our nation's growth.

While New York City is home to millionaires, 36,000 people daily dig in trash cans for their meals.

There are 30 million Americans, including 4.9 million elderly, who cannot afford adequate food and have to go hungry. In 1995, in California, which has enough food to feed our entire country, 5 million people did not have enough to eat.

And lastly, the massive growth of homelessness epitomizes the crisis we are now experiencing. Every winter, 1,500 homeless people are found frozen to death of the streets of the USA. To quote a wise man, Gandhi - "the deadliest form of violence is poverty." And as we look to the rest of the world, we today will watch another 800 million people go hungry and that number is expected to soar and if this trend persists, 1.3 billion people are expected to live on less than \$1 a day by the year 2000. Thus hundreds of millions of men, women and children will be denied not only their human rights, but indeed the most essential of all rights -- the right to be human and to be alive.

The Empire in which I live under fails to uphold human rights in my country and violates people's human rights throughout the world. We have launched more than 700 wars and acts of aggression against other countries, killing countless numbers of people with our troops and weapons.

The preparations for war are poverty and misplaced priorities and the drive of multi-national corporations. Our government spends massive amounts on the military that results in the real loss of human life throughout the world through both openly declared wars and covert military operations. While military spending is increasing to destroy the lives of those

of Kosovo, the dismantling of our safety net to keep people alive is occurring at home.

We at the KWRU are absolutely convinced that in order to really talk in terms of abolishing war, we must talk about abolishing poverty. They must go hand in hand. We must stop describing the wars that we see as just evil guys and begin to expose the real questions of wealth and power. In order for us to achieve a world at peace, a world in which no one goes hungry and homeless, we must organize those who are struggling for their very survival. This is what we're doing with our Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign. We are putting the poor of the world in a direct relationship to each other. We will no longer have the poor of one country fight the poor of another country in order to build the wealth for the richest 5% of the world. Those of us who have lived on the streets in the world, who have watched our children go hungry, are beginning to get organized. We will not have a contest as to who can adjust to a lower standard of living in different parts of the world. We will work together with the Hague Appeal for Peace to abolish war by calling for economic justice for all. We believe our vision is possible. We only need to organize and live out what we all believe.

There can be no peace without economic justice. Peace is possible -- we will make it happen.

'Deadbeat Dad' or Unemployed Father?, 1999

Every morning, across the United States, the hunt begins" Fathers are dragged out of their homes, handcuffed and incarcerated. Mothers cry in welfare offices while child-support-enforcement workers demand answers to the dozens of questions as to the whereabouts of the father.

Child support is the latest arena in the battle to overhaul America's welfare system. The target being used is the newest scapegoat for the ruling class since the Welfare Queen-the Deadbeat Dad. This new up-and-coming stereotype of the nation's poor has quickly become an excuse for the poverty-stricken state of America's underbelly.

Simplification of this country's poor is not original. It's a tactic that has been seen before. Pinpoint an effect of poverty that is understandably shared by the victims and create a stigma around it. Pin the blame on the victims, or on a subgroup of the victims, and the real culprit is not only cleared of doing wrong but is looked to for solutions.

By painting the picture of the Welfare Queen, the media furthered the idea that there is only one type of person that received welfare and that she was the one to blame for her own situation and the situation of thousands of other welfare recipients. These suggestions were meant to cause a tear in solidarity among the nation and the poor.

Likewise, with the newest addition to the list of vilified scapegoats, the male figure in poverty-stricken households, the individual male in poverty is being pegged as the reason why poor women are poor and have no help with their children.

As a part of this new emerging class, we as women need to recognize what and who the real reasons behind our plights are. We need to rise up together and stop allowing ourselves to be used and misrepresented by the rich women of this country who represent the whole of America's RICH just as we represent the whole of America's POOR.

It is said that the misery of poor women is caused by the negligence of poor men. I say it's high time that we begin to testify to the truth-- to expose the accusations for the lies they really are. None of us will benefit from filling the nation's jails with our fathers, brothers, and sons who have been denied the right to a job that would enable them to pay for the proper support of their child.

As poor women, let us fulfill our leading roles in history by not integrating into a system that is killing our brothers and sons. Let us bury a system that forces us to visit our sons, fathers, or brothers in jail or at their graves. Just as slavery destroyed a man's ability to parent, so too does capitalism. Let's not fall for the capitalist's game or incarcerating our brothers. Instead, let us join forces to make a link that will enable us to successfully fight for power so that our children can be raised by both mothers and their fathers in a country where everyone prospers.

Speech at Cornell University, 2001

I want to start off by telling you a little story that I usually begin any talk with when I talk about how the Kensington Welfare Rights Union came to use human rights language and began to approach our work from a human rights perspective. It's a little unorthodox, it's a little different from sitting in a classroom and somebody passing out the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and telling us that these were the rights that we have and that we should do something to reclaim these rights. It was actually in 1995. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union, if you don't know anything about our organization-- when homeless families are in need of some place to live, we either move them into abandoned houses or we build encampments, and they sometimes turn into towns. We always think that someone is responsible for the development of these shantytowns, so we make sure that we give these shantytowns names. And this particular shantytown we called Ridgeville, after our Governor, because after all he was responsible for the population of people in the town. And so people would come up to American Street and it would say, "Welcome to Ridgeville," and we would have homeless families living in shacks and we'd use plastic and if we were lucky we would have some wood, and we would do whatever we possibly could in order that the families could stay together, they could stay alive. One day, we got a horrible message: two portable toilets showed up with a little note from the mayor saying, "I hope that these toilets will be of assistance to you."

So, to us, it was kind of like saying, "get ready to live like this forever and expand your town and we'll provide you with toilets. And so we decided out of necessity that we had to begin to go someplace else and to do something different, and so from that encampment, we decided to march for seven days. We marched to Harrisburg to meet with our Governor and to ask him what would we do with all of these homeless families. And when we got to Harrisburg after marching for 22 miles each and every day, we didn't know that you had to put Vaseline on your feet. We didn't know

anything about long marches, we just got up every day and marched until we basically dropped in the evening, and slept alongside the roadside with our children.

When we arrived at the Governor's mansion, he didn't even send out the janitor and so we lined up remembering the history of Senator Roxanne Jones, who was the first welfare recipient to run for State Senator in Pennsylvania. At one time, she had been furious with the Governor, and she took off her shoes in the middle of a debate and hurled her shoes at the Governor. We decided to pass on her legacy. So, all of us, all homeless people lined up in front of the Governor's mansion took off our shoes and hurled them onto the Governor's lawn. Needless to say this was not a good idea after marching for seven days, to be left with our blisters now on the roadside with all of our shoes lying on the lawn. We decided then that the homeless families needed some place to go. This was not just a demonstration; this was not symbolic. So we took all of the homeless families and we moved ourselves into the Capital Rotunda. And while we were in the Capital Rotunda, we got to know the janitorial staff, and we got to understand how politics work. And the first day that we were there, they were having a bipartisan event of champagne and caviar and they arrived in ballroom gowns in the Rotunda, and the head of the Democratic party stepped to us and said, "Could you go down to the end of the hallway? And I'll give you some free boxed lunches." And one of the homeless women said it the best, "We didn't walk for seven days to talk about being homeless in Pennsylvania to be hidden down at the end of the hallway for a free box lunch."

Needless to say, that evening they had the shortest event I think they've ever had in their life with us sitting on the stairs, them in their gowns with their champagne glasses and caviar. They quickly decided to go home. But we remained there on the floor in the Rotunda for about six weeks. It was very exciting to the homeless families to have things like running water, to be able to use a toilet, to have the experience of heat in the evening, and to be able to have lights, to be able to see your way around in the evening. And so while

we were there we were also engaged in other kinds of activities that happen in our capital, which is they decided to have, a couple people decided to get married in the Rotunda, and so we got the leftover food from the weddings, and we got the bouquets, and the brides wished us well. People began to bring in their children, saying, "this is what real homeless people look like." We'd wave. People began taking little field trips to look at the specimen of homeless people inside this building.

And then one day came when they began to post notices around the entire capital stating that this public building now had a closing time. And so, one day, when we didn't expect it, Pennsylvania State Troopers filled the Rotunda and literally picked us up and threw us out onto the front stairs. And while we were out on the front stairs, we decided that we had to stay, we had no place else to go. So we took big pieces of plastic and created a huge encampment on the Capital stairs. And this time the homeless people that they wanted to make invisible, the Governor now approached the Capital in the morning to a sign that said: "There by the grace of God go I, Welcome to Ridgeville."

And so people from all over Pennsylvania could see us on the Capital stairs. And every day that we were there, we began to gather support from different people all over Pennsylvania. And then the day came when they threatened that the next day at noon that they would evict the homeless families from the Capital stairs after we had been there for another six weeks. Through the rain and the cold weather, you name it, we still hung in with each other. And on that day, we decided that we would ask Community Legal Services for assistance, because after all, we had First Amendment rights, we had the right to demonstrate on public stairs. Certainly, if they had a right to throw us out of a public building, we had a right to be on public stairs. And homeless people, the last thing they have is their voice, certainly that can't be taken away. And then that horrible morning came, when the head of legal services came and spoke to me on the Capital stairs saying, "Cheri, I'm terribly sorry, but we've been threatened by the

Governor to take a million dollars from our budget. We're not gonna be able to represent you in order to keep you on the stairs.

So we decided to organize a tour of the Governor's mansion at the same time that we were expected to be evicted from the Capital stairs. And then we returned after our wonderful tour, and the mothers spoke out about what it was like to see that the Governor's dogs lived better than their children. And that night, on the Capital stairs, the coldest night in October, at about about 2 o'clock in the morning, the Governor ordered the removal of the blankets. State Troopers came and took blankets from men, women, and children on the coldest night in October. And it was that night that we had to walk, we walked to the end of the grocery store, we got plastic from the grocery store, and cardboard. And we wrapped ourselves in cardboard and plastic and continued to take shifts in walking all night so that nobody would die from hypothermia. That's how the Kensington Welfare Rights Union came to understand human rights. What it felt like to be considered less than a human being. That's how we came to use the language of Economic Human Rights.

I'm so happy that all of you could be here tonight and take time out of your busy schedules to let me share some of my thoughts with you, about the dire situation that we find ourselves in as nation. And I am not referring to Afghanistan, or Anthrax. I am talking about the emergency situation of absolute poverty that poor people in America are barely enduring, and barely surviving. I am talking about poverty in the United States of America, in the land of plenty. Let me begin by talking about our children. The thing that we say as a country is our most important and precious thing in our society. One in two of our children will never complete a single year at Cornell, or at any other college across our country. One in three will be a year or more behind in school. And one in four will be born poor. One in five is poor right now. And one in five will be born to a mother who never had prenatal care. One in seven will live with a parent who works, but still is poor, regardless of them working full time. One in

eleven lives at less than half of the poverty level, and one in 132 will die before the age of one this year. And in 1 in 680 will be killed before the age of 20 by being shot to death by a handgun.

Yet every 14 hours we will spend more on the military than we do annually on programs for children. Every 29 hours we will spend more on the military than we do annually on a summer jobs program for unemployed youth. While millions in today's America are deprived of their basic human right to food, to housing, health care, and a living wage job, the US infant mortality rate continues to soar, and so do poverty rates and illiteracy rates. They are amongst the world's worst for an industrialized nation. We will watch as the number of millionaires continues to triple while the ranks of homeless are doubling, and the looming crisis of millions more are about to line our streets next year as we dismantle the only safety net that we've had in our country. As women and children begin to hit their five year lifetime limit on public assistance, and they are cut from the roles forever. Some estimate that more American children die each year because of poverty than the total United States combat deaths in the entire Vietnam War. Many of us continue to wallow in illusions of opportunity that somehow we will make it, somehow we will be different, and somehow we will sit this one out, believing that we have no responsibility to the next generation. But American children are counting on you, are counting on the students here at Cornell, and so are we, the poor in this country, because we know that we can no longer fight this fight alone, we know that there has been an undeclared war and we will not win it without your assistance. This movement needs you now more than ever to use your power, and yes, your privilege as students to help in the building of a massive movement for Economic Human Rights. We need you to document the stories of those who aren't surviving this undeclared war. We need you to hold teach-ins on this very campus about what's really happening in our country. We need you to hold marches and rallies and speak outs, and give voices to those of us who are being made invisible, who are being made to absolutely disappear through the prisons and

the drugs, and to death because we don't have these basic rights.

And as we begin to watch the faces of the poor, as we see them over and over again. Of the poor in Afghanistan, let us think of the faces of the poor that you will never see on television at home, and as you cringe in the fear of encountering Anthrax, or cry for the 13 people who have died from exposure, cry too for the thousands that have been exposed to heroin and crack/cocaine, and didn't have a right to recovery or mental health care, and have died as a result.

Yes, we understand the problem of being a part of an invisible war, in which no humanitarian packets are being made for our fighters here at home, who are struggling for their survival. We understand the importance of making this war at home visible to the entire world, which is why we are organizing a march on the opening day of the Winter Olympics in Utah. We will wear green scarves to show our growing unity with the poor around the world, and most importantly, with the largest poor people's movement in India, the peasant farmers. We will also continue to house families by moving them into government-owned abandoned properties, or by building other Ridgevilles, or by building other encampments in the shadows of mansions. And as we struggle to keep our people alive by doing food distributions and engaging them in the fight for their very survival, as we teach them how to fight, let us ask the question tonight, what will you do? We know that what we are doing, those of us that have been pushed to the edge, and what we will do.

The question is what will you do? What will you do for the American children? America's next generation, the future of our country, collectively, resides in your hands. Now it's up to you to help us decide what kind of society all of us will live in. We're doing our part, will you do yours? Thank you.

Speech at American Civil Liberties Union National Conference, June 2002

Seeking sanctuary in cold abandoned churches, and sleeping out in the rain in empty lots seems pretty far removed from all the lawyers in this room, who suit up and argue before judges or lobby politicians for new legislation. And most of the time it is pretty far removed. And that is exactly the problem. Because as public interest lawyers you are either with movements or you are standing still. And too much of public interest work today is about standing still – and keeping things as they are – the legal community is in a completely defensive posture and has become an implementer of laws, a force for “conserving” what we have, instead of creating what we need. Practicing public interest law has always required a difficult balancing between working within the rules of the system and challenging the system – but as an organizer it feels like we have lost almost all the lawyers to the former, and very few are willing to truly take on the latter. While no one can doubt the importance of fighting to keep the rights we already have by challenging laws that are either clearly or probably unconstitutional, or defective in some other way – *is that all* the legal community is willing to do? Because if it is, you are fighting a losing battle. You can never win in a struggle to protect rights unless you are part of creating a culture of rights – and a true culture of rights, protects all rights for all people – civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights – for the poor, for immigrants, for minorities, for women, for gay, bisexual and transgendered people – for everyone. Not just rights that the establishment is comfortable with – free speech yes, but food and housing no. And not just people that the establishment is comfortable with – but also the undocumented and the poor for example.

In this country you cannot be part of creating a culture of rights by staying within the law – you must go outside the law and then hope the law will catch up. I have had lawyers, including those affiliated with this revered institution, tell me that they couldn't help me because what I was doing was

illegal. Protesting without a permit, and taking homes abandoned by the city for homeless women and children. Now I know this is illegal, which is probably why they keep arresting me. But I say, as long as there are children and their mothers on the street while there is perfectly usable housing rotting for lack of political will – then they can keep arresting me, not the hundred times they already have, but thousands of times if necessary. Dr. King understood this when he took on the establishment – and while he was peaceful, he was anything but accepting of an unacceptable system. I often wonder if he would be able to find a lawyer today to support and help him commit his “illegal” acts.

We all know that there are no rights for the poor in this country. The cops arrest you at times for nothing else except being poor, the courts convict you and validate those convictions by giving you overburdened legal aid lawyers who don't have the time to learn your name, and the welfare system punishes and humiliates you when you aren't in jail. Children go hungry and when you can't house and feed your children, they do the worst thing imaginable – the worst thing you can do to a human being—they take away your children into a dangerous and unpredictable foster care system. And they know they got you when they can threaten to take away your children. Given this reality – lawyers have to stop their obsession with this thing they call precedent. 'Cause the precedent in this country is just not good enough. Don't be afraid to lose a case, if it can help a movement. When a judge says you are wrong, you may still be right. You are not here to enforce the law as is, you are here to change the world. So stop being enforcers of precedent, stop being just enforcers of the Constitution – expand it, improve it, make it relevant to the millions of people who are poor and homeless in this country. They are going to keep arresting me, and my challenge to you is what are you – as the public interest law community – going to do about it?

A New and Unsettling Force, 2003

co-written by Willie Baptist

"...There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life..."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr,
The Trumpet of Conscience, 1967

It is no accident that the last years of Martin Luther King, Jr's life are the least discussed and least understood. In the final period of his life, King determined that what had been a movement for *civil* rights must become a movement for *human* rights targeting global poverty including its 'downsizing' and devastating impact on the lives of huge population sectors of the world's richest country, the United States of America. As many of King's former allies abandoned him, and as repression against King and the movement increased, King set about a building a "non-violent army of the poor" to set up an encampment in Washington DC during the spring of 1968. This effort would lead to his assassination. During a little publicized trial in December 1999, his assassination was determined not to be the work of a 'fanatical racist' but the coordinated effort by officials at many levels of the government, involving local intelligence and police, the FBI, CIA, and Military Intelligence. (see the Official Transcripts from MLK, Jr's Assassination Trial at www.universityofthepoor.org.)

The Poor People's Campaign, which was the major priority of King's final years, was about organizing and uniting the poor across racial lines in the United States, and ultimately internationally. King understood that the deep moral and political crises of his time - racism, war, social inequality - were, and still are, ultimately rooted in an economic system which deprives millions of the right to a decent life. After the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting

Rights Act of 1965 he realized that, "We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society... this means a revolution of values among other things. We see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together... you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others..." - Talk at a May, 1967 SCLC Staff Meeting.

"A multi-racial nonviolent army, or freedom church of the poor" would be constituted as "a new and unsettling force" capable of awakening the thinking and conscience of the American people from all walks of life who would then "lift the load of poverty" with the more than sufficient productive means already at hand. More than thirty years later, King's words are still prophetic: "There is a fire raging now for the...poor of this society. Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds. They need brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system until the emergency is solved." - *The Triumph of Conscience*, 1967.

King spoke of the need and possibility of the United States "living out the true meaning of its creed" that all of God's children are created equal and are endowed with the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is the soul of America the redemption of which he committed himself. Freedom and happiness mean nothing without the economic human rights to decent housing, adequate health-care and food, a job at a living wage, and quality education. The tremendous productive capacity and abundance of the United States today make the absent of these things for increasing millions immoral and unjust. In building a movement for economic human rights led by the poor as a united and organized force, we are building the means necessary to reclaim the best of our country's most basic values and morals.

The Kensington Welfare Rights Union, a multiracial organization of poor and homeless families, took up the banner of

economic human rights five years ago and began documenting economic human rights violations across the United States. We have found that our own stories as poor, homeless, and underemployed families in Philadelphia are repeated every day across this country. We have found that there truly is a fire raging in our country today, a fire whose intensity has been stoked by three decades of massive downsizing, welfare reform and other cutbacks in social programs, by automation, globalization, and an economy which has created a new class of people of all races who increasingly are permanently denied a right to the most basic necessities of life.

We have felt and witnessed this fire raging - from Kensington, North Philadelphia, where homeless, unemployed families sleep inside abandoned factories and where thousands of jobs are gone and are not coming back; to Kansas, where farmers are being thrown off of their land because they cannot compete against large agri-business; to Flint, Michigan, where automation of the automobile industry followed by the loss of jobs to the NAFTA left hundreds of thousands of people with no jobs and crumbling housing; to Florida, where farmworkers can barely afford to eat the food they pick; and to Idaho, where families who have been laid off live in tents along the river in one of the coldest places in the United States.

As we have traveled the United States to build the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, we have seen the desperate need for "brigades of ambulance drivers" to unite to put out this fire which is killing our children, our brothers and sisters, our fathers and mothers, and which threatens to spread and envelop our whole society if we do not act now. We need to get serious about building leaders among the poor and uniting the people of this country behind a banner of economic human rights for all. We see, as Dr King saw, that our country and our world need to be "born again." And so we have taken up the legacy of Dr. King and adapted it to our current political and economic situation.

Like King, we see that the fire raging today demands that we

ignore the red lights of the present system—such as unjust laws that force us to sleep in the streets in front of empty houses, as well as the red lights which tell us we can't march on public streets when we know that our voice is the only thing that will save us; the red lights that tell us to be patient and wait; the red lights that tell us that we are unrealistic and that poverty can't be ended, even when we have more than enough to go around. We are following in the footsteps of Dr. King by using non-violent civil disobedience, including housing takeovers, marches of thousands of people, and a recent tent city on Market Street in Center City Philadelphia, in which 12 homeless people, including 6 children, were arrested for fighting for affordable housing.

The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 went to the places no one wanted to go and organized thousands of poor people, uniting the poor of all races from both rural and urban areas - and politically educating them to build a "non-violent multiracial army of the poor." King knew that the future of our society is bound up with the fight of the poor for their freedom from want and misery. The essence of King's life and legacy is a deep conviction that a new society is possible, and that this new society is only possible through a massive movement involving people from all walks of life, a movement founded on the unity and organization of the poor of all colors. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the Poor People Economic Human Rights Campaign are determined to concentrate all of our energies and resources to continue this most urgent and morally necessary struggle to which the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. dedicated and gave his life. We call on all to do the same.

First Hemispheric Meeting Against Militarization,
San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico, May 6, 2003

"The Struggle of the Poor in the USA"

Good Evening. I'd like to begin this evening by thanking the organizers of this event for this historic event.

As a poor person from the United States, it has been a long road to get here. As you know from my introduction, I have been organizing poor and homeless people in the U.S. for about 20 years now. I have spent my whole life in poverty. As a mother of 2 children, I have experienced a great deal of violence in my life. The worst has been the economic violence of being homeless with my older son and not knowing one winter night if me and my son would freeze to death by the next morning. I hope by the end of my talk to have convinced you of the serious crisis that the poor are in that organize for their daily survival.

In my country, 675,000 people have lost their jobs to NAFTA. 33,000 family farmers have lost their farms. 44 million people are without health insurance and over 60 million people are living in poverty. And as our country's media shows you lies about Iraq, another population of people have been made to disappear - the poor and homeless in the USA. This year our country ended the entitlement to help the poor, which was the only thing keeping many of the poor from being homeless. Now our country's urban and rural areas are now filled with millions of new homeless people. People who once had jobs at these factories whose corporations have picked up and left our country to come to Mexico and other parts of the world to exploit the people by paying them even less.

All that is left for us is vacant, abandoned lots, land that they left polluted when they took our jobs. With welfare ending, drugs are now our number one source of income. Crack and heroin can be sold for less than a pack of cigarettes.

One day, I watched as four young people were stacked in the back of a paddywagon after they had died from bad heroin. These four young people's lives didn't even warrant an investigation. Four expendable human beings. And the real painful thing is - nobody will ever know that these human rights violations are occurring in our rich and powerful country. The National Guard has used the Chester housing projects for training and the National Guard can be seen periodically boarding up abandoned houses in our neighborhoods.

Police are everywhere. One day, 450 police officers touched down with helicopters and dogs and pulled everyone over and patted them down under the auspices of a drug raid.

We now have "Target Tuesdays" where people live in fear of going to jail on Tuesday. A month ago, our governor eliminated monies to help people with drug and alcohol problems. Thousands will remain in jail because this money no longer exists. 30,000 people with drug problems will be returned to the streets, making death of incarceration a daily reality in our community.

There is no affordable housing in Philadelphia and there are no plans in our elected leader's plans to make any housing available. So what we have is more abandoned houses than homeless people. But if we move these families into the abandoned houses we go to jail. The city of Philadelphia just spent a year trying to prosecute myself and two of our leaders for housing homeless people. I was facing six months in jail for housing a high-risk pregnant mother.

You see, our country has more prisons than anyplace in the world. The number one crime in which people are in prison is for economic crimes. Our country also has the highest death penalty and uses it on children. Even before 9/11 the FBI was openly filming our efforts to house homeless people.

Before Bush became president we organized 10,000 poor women, men and children in a March for Economic Human Rights and as a result they threatened to take our children

away if the mothers were arrested in our march. And they parked a huge police truck with officers inside in front of our office for months.

When we're not busy moving homeless families into abandoned houses we're building homeless encampments or participating in marches for our lives. We have no paid staff, only a will and a commitment for a better life for ourselves and our children.

It is our children - the poor - who fight in rich men's wars. Our children join because they have no way to feed their families, get healthcare or an education. Or they didn't want to sell drugs in Kensington. It is our poor families who also wave the American flag - for not to wave the flag would mean that you don't support your own family.

We are a people who live from month to month, who cry at night for our children's future, who wish we could have heat in our homes in the winter or water to bathe our children. And for those of us in our country who will sleep with our children in a car, under a bridge or on a church floor - we pray that we will remain invisible no longer and that people, organizations and movements will begin to see us and understand the level of danger we are in and that people will begin to bear witness to the war occurring in Kensington and across the US against the poor.

Our country houses the School of the Americas - so when will people understand the serious danger of organizing in the belly of the beast or that the poor getting organized in the US against the empire should be seen as a strategic significance for all the people who live in daily terror from the empire we live under. When will the solidarity networks, unions, religious leaders and legal community in our own country hear our cry and see our invisible people and faceless children? Whenever a military base is built or a bomb is dropped more of our people go hungry and become even more invisible and become in danger from speaking out.

So, what should be done?

We need to encourage people to help build the movement of the poor in the U.S.

See poverty as a human rights violation in the US because it could have been prevented. Monitor and document!

Help us break our isolation.

Don't believe the stereotypes about the poor in the US.

Understand that poverty is one of the root causes of war.

Have the organized poor themselves participate directly on behalf of themselves in these conferences.

Let's end poverty in the US and across the world! Lastly, join us on August 2nd for the National Poor People's March.

Speech at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville, August 5, 2003

My name is Cheri Honkala. My mother always said I had problems following the rules, so I'm going to speak on a variety of issues. I'm going to first start off tonight by having the people that are going on this March stand up, and having a round of applause for them.

We've learned a lot of lessons organizing other poor and homeless families over the past ten or twelve years, and one of the most important lessons that I've learned over the years, personally and as an organizer, is that the number one thing we have to do is put names and faces behind poverty in America, these unsung heroes. People continue to keep the history of the original Poor People's Campaign in 1968 invisible. We don't talk about it and we don't know much about it. We haven't read about it a whole lot or seen a lot of pictures. We haven't heard all the oral histories, and we want to make sure this time around that we don't do the same thing--that we hold up that history, and that we also acknowledge the real unsung heroes that are here in this room. I'd also like to acknowledge the folks that were on the original March. Would you please stand?

I really enjoyed opening up with this angry poem, because I'm kind of an angry woman--people are looking at me like, "no really?"--but anyway, people are always like: "you've got an attitude!" People always look at me like, "oh my God, could you lighten up? Take that chip off your shoulder?" And I pray to God I never do take that chip off my shoulder, because the day that I adjust to hunger, homelessness, children going without shoes, people living outdoors and living in these inhumane conditions-- please admit me to some psychiatric unit, because I will have stopped living.

And so I like when we start with a lot of anger. And just so we all get angry, Tennessee is the fourth in the nation for families living in poverty. Tennessee is the *first* in the nation for seniors living in poverty, and 35 percent of renters in

Tennessee lack affordable housing. 25,000 jobs have been lost in Tennessee due to NAFTA, and 56.8 of your so-called new jobs in Tennessee pay poverty-level wages. Am I the only one angry?

I'm also someone who is incredibly spiritual. That's the secret that sustains me; that gets me up in the morning, because I am a spiritual woman. And I believe from the bottom of my heart that poverty is not God's will, and I am not a poor woman because I have a mental health problem, or I have a substance-abuse problem--I am a poor woman in America because of greed. And greed is a sin against God. It is also a sin against God not to actively do the Lord's work, and not to fight for economic justice every day of our lives. It is not enough to pray about it, it is not enough to sing about it, to talk about it, to testify about it. We must begin to support people and efforts in which people are trying to consciously build a movement, not to manage poverty in our country, but to eliminate it, because it's possible in our country. And it is not okay for some people to have healthcare in our country when others don't, and to have some people have two or three houses and many of us have absolutely none. There is plenty to go around, and there is no reason for homelessness, or poverty, or hunger for one minute. So if somebody tries to convince you that it's just about life-skills management, or spiritual deprivation, they are committing a sin because **THEY ARE LYING**. There is plenty to go around.

We need to begin to do the Lord's work, and that means the hard work. That means confronting economic human rights violations in our country, and beginning to show whose side we're on. Are we going to stand with the folks who have the least, or are we going to continue to stand on the sidelines and not do anything about it? That is the question of the hour. We need to build unity and organization of the poor. We no longer will benefit from pity and from tears alone. We need people to step forward. We are asking you to join and enlist in what Dr. Martin Luther King called the nonviolent poor people's army to end poverty. We need your time, and yes your money, because these vehicles do not run on

love, they run on gasoline. We need your prayers, your family's involvement, and we need the skills that you are hiding today, and the lessons that you have to teach us. Especially if you are a poor person in America, you have so many skills that you need to share with your brothers and sisters that are in this room. You just need to figure out what those are, and you need to give those skills that you have to build this movement.

We're not going to end poverty by a handful of poor people in America. We will end poverty when all of us in this room—when our mothers, and our sisters, and our pastors—decide that we're tired. That we are honest-to-God, from the bottom of our heart, tired of testimony after testimony, and of march after march. And when we are totally serious about ending poverty in this country, you know what? We're going to end poverty in this country. There is no magic secret behind it. When we decide that we are going to stand up, to get organized, when we stop using the excuse that that "I'm too old," or "I'm too sick," or "I'm too bored," or "I'm too tired, because I work too many jobs," and when all of us decide that we are tired of it, and we begin to commit ourselves and to join this movement, that's when we will end poverty in this country. And I believe that that is God's will, because I believe that it is not God's will that our children go hungry, that it is not God's will that we live in the inhumane conditions that we live in, and it is our responsibility to do the Lord's work to ensure that we wipe out these conditions.

Now I was supposed to talk about the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. Those are just fancy words for the fact that corporations are benefiting at our expense, in terms of taking jobs and going to the cheapest labor in whatever part of the world, and because we're beginning to live on a very small planet, what happens in the Philippines, or what happens in South America, or on the border in Mexico, has direct impact on the workers here at home.

We must begin to get organized and uplift our people here, and we need to stop being ashamed and coming up with ex-

cuses like "what's wrong with me," and start saying, "there's a lot that's right with me, and maybe there's something wrong with a society that continues to promote these conditions."

Those of you who are in recovery know that's the first that thing you've got to do. I don't have to start talking about most of the people that are in our country who are in denial, I'll just talk to poor white folks in this country who are in serious denial. We've got to start stepping forward and saying "I'm poor, and I'm not going to be ashamed about being poor in America."

When we begin to say that we want to end poverty, and that we're poor, and when we stop coming up with a certain category of what the heck poor means—if you have a hard time struggling with any of the basic necessities of life—then you're poor, you know? Whether it's struggling a whole lot with your mortgage or to pay rent, or you're living underneath a bridge, or you don't have enough money for your medicines, whatever that is, that means you're poor and you should be a part of our army. Thank you for having us here tonight. Let's end poverty, let's do God's will.

Speech at the World Social Forum, as part of the World Court of Women, Mumbai, India, January 2004

My name is Cheri Honkala. I'm here to speak on behalf of myself and other poor and homeless people who are a part of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union or the movement called the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign in the USA.

It has taken me three days to get here but I am here. I'm here because I have to be. Many people claim to be experts on the poor in the U.S. and in turn serve the role of silencing those very voices. As a formerly homeless mother who now lives day to day, I know what it is to live in a rich country and have my evening consist of crackers and dry cereal with nothing else. I know what it's like to go days and weeks without running water. To endure the indignities from the smell of not being able to bathe yourself or your children. I know what it's like to live in a car, what it feels like to sleep night after night with your body made into a ball hoping that the police don't come and tap on the window and make you move or threaten to take your child away. Yes I know what it is like to live in the cold north with no heat, I know what it's like to try and use your body heat to try and keep your child from freezing to death before morning, to wake his little body up over and over again to make sure that he's alive.

And I know what it's like to live in a country that hides these very things. Hides the taking of children only because the families are homeless. Hides the third world conditions in a first world country. Hides the people who die every day in my country because they were homeless and froze to death or died because they didn't have health care. Hides the 9000 American soldiers who have either died or been evacuated due to serious bodily injury in Iraq. Hides the fact that most soldiers are poor, joining the military for a job or health care. Hides the rage growing that the billions of dollars used to kill people in Iraq was stolen from the mothers and fathers trying to feed, house and clothe their children at home. Civil liberties are pretty much gone now in our country and if you try

to expose the war taking place at home in a real way you pretty much know that they will take you out. Get rid of you and make you disappear.

The homeless of Bombay share a similar experience with the homeless and poor in the U.S. - where there is extreme poverty, there is extreme wealth. Others are benefiting from our deprivation. We applaud the efforts of the poor in India to challenge the treatment of the poor - for as Gandhi said, "the worst form of violence is poverty." 84% of our city's shelters are all full now and regularly denying men, women, children and infants shelter. 59% of those who are now requesting emergency food are women and children. This has to stop! And it has to stop now! People are dying in my country from crack cocaine and heroin overdoses, from AIDS, Tuberculosis, Hepatitis C. Our children go without immunizations - this economic terrorism must be stopped!

I love my country, but I fear my government and the terrorists in charge. So when you ask: "If things are really that bad in the USA, why don't we see the large numbers of people on the streets? Need I remind you that a percentage of the 87 billion dollars used for the killing of people in Iraqi is also being used to control any voices of dissent at home. We have more people in prison than anywhere else in the world. 44 different law enforcement agencies at the last FTAA demonstration in Miami should send an alert to the international community about whether democracy really exists anymore in the United States.

It's been years now that I have had to live in fear of my work being cut short or not being able to raise my children, because it's been years now since I haven't always had current pending charges against me for trying to expose the conditions of the poor. I currently have a stay-away order from City Hall for trying to obtain housing for victims of domestic violence. I've also been given criminal charges. But this is everyday life for me and the other leaders in the movement of the poor.

Our country trains the death squads and the dictators at the School of the Americas. And we live in this country. We are trying to raise our children, stay out of prison and trying to stay alive in the belly of the beast.

Four years ago when Bush became president of our country, Diane Sawyer for 20/20 ABC News came in to my office to interview myself and my son and she asked me if I was afraid for my life organizing a march on opening day of the Republican National Convention. Well four years have passed, my governor became in charge of "Homeland Security" for the entire country, and we're organizing the largest march of poor and homeless people this year on opening day of the Republican National Convention, August 30th. Not because I'm afraid for my life, but because the poor of my country and other parts of the world will not survive another Bush administration. I fear for the lives and futures of all of us.

Don't allow the poor of our country to be invisible or to disappear. We need outside intervention to deal with the terrorism of hunger, homelessness, and no health care in the USA.

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